

To Be a Debutante

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For Kay

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Lady Emily Black liked presents.

It wasn't that she always expected to receive presents nor did she expect everyone to bring her presents when calling on her. It was just comforting to think about presents and what *might* be forthcoming.

Like the anticipation on a rainy day. There were so many possibilities when one was confined to an indoor space. One never knew what one might embark upon. Given a rainy day, Emily would most likely be found in the sewing room, patterns splashed across the sofas, fabrics spilling to the floor, her nose near touching the fashion plates of the latest edition of *La Belle Assemblée*. She could have an entire season's wardrobe designed in the space of one drizzly afternoon.

As she contemplated the pencils in E.B. Worthy's on Marlborough, her eyes didn't see plain, black stubs of charcoal. She saw designs springing from their tips to radiate across the blank page of her sketchbook, a waterfall of fashion from a single nub.

Yes, Emily Black very much liked presents, and these pencils would do just nicely.

"Papa," she said then, spinning about and holding the charcoals aloft. "I think I should like these."

Her father did not seem to have heard her as he stared out the front window of the shop. The light fell across him in such a way as to accent his finely tailored coat of dark cloth and trousers cut just right along the thigh and knee. There were things about her father Emily found lacking, especially his inability to keep his gray-smattered dark hair in neat fashion, but his choice of tailor was not something with which she could find fault.

"Papa," she said, louder this time with quite a lot of girth as her mother would say. "Papa, I said I would like these charcoals."

Still nothing.

After presents, the second thing Emily Black liked most was attention. She found the blood in her temples pounded a little harder when someone denied her the attention she wished. Right now, her papa was guilty of such a thing, which was rather unusual. She would expect such behavior from Jane, her older cousin, and certainly from

her brothers, Ashley and Michael. She had the pleasure of her younger sister's complete and total attention when she was present, but Emily feared that was more out of some sort of worship phase the child was going through.

Emily softly patted the cascading folds of her skirt, the fabric just the right shade of pink to complement her untarnished skin, and a soft, knowing smile came to her lips. Madeline had every reason to adore her. The child had shown outstanding astuteness in the choosing of a proper role model for such a thing. As the eldest daughter of the Duke of Lofton, Emily was worthy of such a position.

What she was not worthy of was her father's current state of inattention, and Emily's tolerance wore thin.

"Papa," she said again, her teeth nearly scraping with her impatience. "Papa, I—"

"Just a moment," her father said, raising a single hand in her direction.

Her blood went from pounding to rampaging.

If Emily felt immense joy at the prospect of presents, she felt an equally intense but entirely opposite emotion about being ignored. Anger flared inside her. For but a moment, her nostrils flared, her mouth tightened, and her fingers curled into fists. However, such gestures wreak havoc on fair and untouched skin, so with a breath, she purposefully released the tension in her body.

Shaking her head, she approached her father standing at the front window of the shop. Mother was always saying how her father did not always understand the proper handling of womanly issues, and this was apparently one of those situations. She assumed an expression of tender understanding, not unlike the one she used on simpletons, like servants and the sons of viscounts or gad, barons.

"Papa," she said once more, her tone dripping with what others might term condescension but Emily liked to think of as helpful and necessary correction of one's behavior. "You seem not to understand the importance—"

"Worth," her father said, his tone gruff and forthright, the way it sometimes sounded when Uncle Nathan would burst into their house at whatever hour of the night, ruthlessly rousing her from her needed rest.

Something was amiss, and it was not her father's slip in appropriate behavior.

Her father strode past her to the back of the shop where the proprietor stood, the Mr. Worth from which the name of the store was derived.

"Worth, have you an errand boy? Anyone who could deliver a note for me?"

Emily did not like this line of questioning whatsoever. Her father had brought *her* here to shop, and it was to her his attention was due. Why was he asking about errand boys? She put fisted hands to her hips in the manner her mother had taught her. One's fragile skin must be sacrificed for the good of straightening men from their misdeeds, such as not paying adequate attention to Lady Emily Black.

"Papa, I demand to know what is going on."

Her father continued to ignore her while Worth stepped into the conversation.

"Of course, Your Grace," Worth responded. "My grandson would be honored to carry a message for you."

Her father bent over the counter that ran the length of the shop, picked up the quill left there and quickly scribbled something on a scrap of paper he pulled from a stack by the till. This was utterly ridiculous, and Emily stepped closer.

"Papa," she said, her voice tilting precariously near to whining.

Ladies did not whine. Children could whine. But not ladies, Emily knew.

"See that this is delivered to my brother, Nathan Black. He should be at the club this afternoon."

Worth took the offered paper in his gnarled and aged hand, which offended Emily for so many reasons she looked away. She didn't see Worth move away from the counter towards the rear of the shop, but a lad suddenly sprung from the back rooms, snatching the paper from the old man before running out the front door.

Emily had had enough. She grabbed her father's elbow, forcing his attention to her. "Papa, I don't think you understand what--"

"Emily," her father's green, cold gaze finally fell on her, his tone the only one she always, under any circumstances, heeded. "There is a man outside who has been following us down Marlborough. I need you to continue shopping as if nothing were amiss. Can you do that?"

* * *

Nathan had taken advantage of a rare afternoon in Town to drop in on a few trusted mates at White's to catch up on the latest out of the War Office. It may have been some time since he had engaged in a proper mission for the Office, but he had recently found himself rather swamped with a sense of nostalgia. Perhaps it was his father's death that had him looking to his old comrades, listening to the same stories over and over, hoping for a scrap of news about the Office's latest concerns, from recent missions to what paper was used to draft correspondence.

It was while he was steeped in this nostalgic mood that Alec's

cryptic message arrived, handed to him by a rather small lad that reminded Nathan of his adopted son at the time of their first introduction in what seemed a distant era. The wistful pang of remembrance in his chest softened into pride at the image of Samuel now, as a grown man and constable at the Metropolitan Police Force.

He smiled, dropping a coin in the boy's hand for his service, and unfolded the scrap of paper.

Being followed. Come at once. E.B. Worth's.

Nathan's immediate reaction was to roll his eyes at his brother's dramatic flair. Who on earth would want to follow a retired, gone-soft War Office agent who hadn't seen the details of a mission in nearly ten years?

He scanned the message again and thinking he would rather enjoy an afternoon of intrigue, went out to hail his carriage from the line of fashionable conveyances lined along the pavement.

"It looks like we're going shopping," he told his coachman and gave directions for E.B. Worth's.

He had his coachman stop nearly a block up from the stationery shop where he alighted as a gaggle of women passed by on the sidewalk. He kept his hat pulled low, a garment he had still not grown used to wearing in Town. He had only developed the habit of wearing such a thing after long hours in the fields of his estate had resulted in a rather uncomfortable shade of red in his skin.

Stepping onto the next block, he scanned the milling throng: the fashionable shoppers, men who carried such focus it was obvious they'd been sent on an errand from their wives, and the odd youth here and there, awkwardly conversing about the pavement as if there was nothing of greater value to do with their time.

He had nearly made it to E.B. Worth's when he spotted the man. He looked like any other patron of Marlborough Street. The man had his back to him, but he noted the breadth of shoulder, the tightness at the hips, and the polite, if worn, cut of his clothes, and Nathan would have missed him completely if it weren't for the newspaper tucked into the man's elbow. The headline blasted across the page was one Nathan distinctly recalled from yesterday's edition of the *Times*, and judging by the wet mark along the crease, the man had likely pulled the thing from a rubbish bin.

Before the man could turn about, Nathan slipped into E.B. Worth's.

His brother stepped out from between two shelves lined with journals.

"Well?" he said by way of greeting.

Nathan jammed his hands into the pockets of his coat. "How in the

hell did you attract a stalker?"

* * *

Alec frowned at his older brother even as he felt the intense rush of relief that he was here. When he had spotted the man earlier, he was fairly certain his long dormant skills as a spy had suddenly sprang to life, eager for a run about the yard, but there had been something not quite right about the way the man had traveled to the same spots along Marlborough, dodging their every footstep. It had been a smart move to send for Nathan. Two against one were much better odds.

"I haven't the faintest idea," Alec said.

Nathan moved toward him, putting the rows of journals between the two of them and the front window. His brother picked up one of the journals, flipping pages with his hands as his eyes darted to the window.

"He is definitely interested in your whereabouts, Your Grace," Nathan murmured. "He's carrying yesterday's paper."

Alec looked from his brother to the suspicious man.

"I don't suppose he simply hadn't had time to read it," Alec responded, casting his head about as he realized Emily had not tugged at his elbow recently.

"The condition of the paper suggests it was purloined from a disreputable location," Nathan said, thumbing through a different journal. "Have any suggestions for how we respond to this situation?"

Alec shook his head, turning his gaze in the opposite direction, waiting for the top of his daughter's hat to peek out from over shelves of parchment and envelopes.

"My plan was to summon you," he said.

Nathan snapped the journal shut. "Well done, boy. You've completed your mission then," Nathan said, putting the journal back on the shelf.

"Do you see Emily?" Alec asked, his annoyance with his eldest daughter igniting a throbbing in his temples.

He wasn't sure why he had been the parent awarded the dubious honor of escorting Emily on an afternoon of shopping. It seemed to be much more his wife's area of expertise, but Sarah had said something about taking Madeline for a fitting. Alec had not desired to learn more on the topic, so he had simply gone along while Emily demanded one thing after another along the shops on Marlborough.

But now he couldn't see her flouncy hat bouncing about between the shelves. He felt a tickle of unease and attempted to brush it aside. His inability to do so made the unease grow by ten fold.

Nathan said, "She's likely practicing her attentions on the

shopkeeper.”

Alec returned his own attention to his brother, recalling Emily’s habit of flirting with anyone of the opposite sex she could find as a means of practicing her wiles.

“Please do not remind me of such distressing things at this time,” he said, looking through the plate glass of the front window.

The man had not moved much, shifting from one foot to the other, tipping slightly now and then from one side to the other.

“It’s not like it goes away if you ignore it,” Nathan said. He had picked up another journal and was thumbing through the blank pages. “Nora is constantly reminding me of Jane’s impending maturity,” he added referring to his wife’s concern for their eldest daughter.

It was then that Alec spotted Emily in the one place he had not looked. “Emily’s outside,” Alec said before turning and hurtling his body toward the door.

Alec was on the street likely before his brother had even put the journal down. The rush of shoppers was no impediment, and with less grace than his title called for, he made his way to the spot he had last seen Emily.

If Sarah had let him, he would have taken their daughter over his knee long ago for her headstrong behavior, but Sarah always said Emily was just being like her father. Alec felt differently about such things, but he wasn’t about to cast the blame in the opposite direction. Now, however, he was certain he would take the paddle to his obstinate daughter. A good thrashing would be the only thing to repay him for the tangled beating of his heart, the roiling of his stomach, the spasms of his muscles as he hurtled himself through the crowd in search of her.

Instead of finding his daughter though, he found the barrel of a gun in his face, and his daughter trapped under the arm of their stalker.

“I wouldna be stepping off like that, dukey.”

* * *

Nathan wasn’t sure which occurred first. Whether it was Alec bursting onto the pavement, his coat flying behind him as he pushed through the throng. The man extracting the gun, extending it before him through the masses. Both actions seemed to happen simultaneously by the time his gaze reached the tableau beyond the front window of the shop.

Perhaps it was Emily. Young, innocent Emily pinned under the man’s arm, unusually silent for one who had never before feared to speak. Was that it now? Was she afraid to say something or was she

merely in shock?

It was not the first time Nathan had seen a gun pointed at his brother's person, but the last time was nearly twenty years prior when his brother was a man in his prime and fit to take on such an affront.

Now Alec was a father, could likely be a grandfather soon. Seeing that gun now, so close to Alec's face, death became utterly imminent and real, the shape of the barrel sharp and solid. The man holding it breathed in labored puffs, inhaling and exhaling the cool damp of the day in misty clouds. But the gun never wavered as the crowd about them erupted.

Before he could wonder any further, he was out of the shop, pushing through the last of the people standing between him and his little brother and without hesitation, freed his own pistol from its harness inside his jacket. He didn't always carry a weapon, but when he came to Town, it gave him a sense of the old times, a feeling of familiarity in a city that was rapidly changing. Now he was glad he carried it.

He had not fully drawn when other sounds reached them. Stampeded hooves, cries of riders urging horses forward. The sound was deafening even with the screams of fleeing shoppers.

Nathan heard nothing, his training silencing the world around him as he straightened his aim, placed his finger on the trigger.

The man with the gun trained on Alec hesitated, his eyes drawn to the sound of approaching riders.

Nathan pulled the trigger.

The explosion ripped from the end of the weapon, cracking through all other sounds until it met with its target. The man with the gun falling, his hand opening and releasing the firearm, his head lolling back, red everywhere.

Emily screamed now, the sound unearthly and startling in its sharpness. Alec lunged forward, wresting her from the dead man's grip. The father cradled the daughter, wrapping his arms about her until-

She pushed him away.

"Is my dress soiled?" Emily screamed, her hands going down her skirts in quick swishing motions.

Alec stepped back, casting his gaze in Nathan's direction, his jaw set, his eyes showing his fury at his daughter's lack of appreciation for her very life.

Nathan holstered his spent weapon, tossing his brother a shrug when he realized the sound of running horses had ceased. He turned in the direction from whence he had heard the travelers only to freeze, his hand motionless around the butt of his gun.

Samuel Black stood not five feet from him, fisted hands on hip,

head tilted to the right, with much the same look on his face that his Uncle Alec sported. Behind him came another gentleman to whom Nathan had not been introduced. The stranger had dark features, carried himself with decorum, and had a long scar running down one side of his face.

Nathan released his grip on his gun and smiled at his son. "Samuel," he said, extending his arms in greeting.

"You couldn't have waited for us to question him?" Samuel said, pointing to the dead man on the ground.

Nathan looked over at the body bleeding out on the pavement and then looked at his brother.

"It was never this much trouble in our day," Alec said with a shrug.

Nathan looked at Samuel. "We didn't have a family to protect then," he said.

* * *

"You might have waited, so the bloke could have been of some use to us."

"I felt time was an element of importance just then," Uncle Nathan replied. "You would have done the same."

Samuel said nothing in return, and Emily wondered if she should be paying more attention to the exchange occurring between her cousin and uncle. If she were fair, her gaze was likely not to stray from where it had fallen nearly an hour before when Samuel had arrived on the scene of her recent inconvenience.

Her father rattled on incessantly about being afraid for her life, but the only thing she had feared at the time was ruining the muslin of her gown. Her father did not have the slightest idea how hard it was to find just the right tone of pink. Honestly. Her life was of little consequence by comparison.

This never would have happened if that man hadn't appeared. The one Uncle Nathan had shot. She wasn't about to let some scoundrel who thought a red cravat was well suited to a peach waistcoat ruin her afternoon of shopping, and she had gone outside simply to tell him so. It needn't have grown out of control to such ghastly proportions that had her cousin, Samuel, intervening.

But her cousin had not ridden up alone to the little tableau in front of E.B. Worth's. He had come with another gentleman. A rather handsome, dangerous-looking gentleman who had been introduced to her as the Marquess of Evanshire.

Marquess.

Emily was the daughter of a duke.

It would be natural for her to take such notice of the gentleman. One might even say it was *expected* of her.

She smoothed her hand over her hair, tucking in a lock that had slipped from its pin, adjusting her hat just enough to show off the line of her cheeks. Her best feature if anyone bothered to ask her.

“Emily?”

She looked over at the person who had spoken her name, quickly, of course, before gazing back at the Marquess of Evanshire.

“Emily?”

Oh, bother.

“Yes?” she said, showing enough teeth to express her disdain for the interruption.

Her cousin Jane stood diminutively beside her, her hands full of tea cup and saucer. Emily frowned at the picture her drabby cousin made. Her choice of fabric did nothing for her palette to say nothing of how she chose to wear her hair. Emily really could improve on it with as little as a curling rod and a yard of choice silk.

“Would you care for some tea? You’ve had quite a shock,” Jane said.

Emily would have wrinkled her nose if it didn’t permanently wrinkle things she did not wish to be so. She merely shook her head.

“I’m fine,” she said, adding, “but thank you,” when she saw Jane’s slightly uncomfortable look.

She was always doing that. Emily, not Jane. She was always having to add dull, polite phrases to the ends of her sentences when she noticed people shifting uncomfortably around her. Such a bother.

Jane began to move away, shuffling around the tables in this odd little space where Emily had been brought. She thought her father had called it a commissary or perhaps commission or something, she wasn’t sure. It was just some old building full of gruff, smelly men employed by the Metropolitan Police. She was too busy making sure none of them touched her skirts and keeping the marquess in sight to have any attention leftover to figure out exactly where she was.

Emily’s grandmother was there and cousin Jane, of course. Something about a case of mistaken identity and near kidnapping that Emily couldn’t be bothered with at the moment.

But then-

“Jane,” she called to her departing cousin.

Jane turned to her, her motion so agonizingly slow and deliberate, Emily wanted to scream at her. But dull Jane had never intentionally done anything deserving of such behavior. It was not as if she wanted to be so dull. Sometimes it just happened to people. Emily did her best to understand, and she was sure everyone noticed her kindness.

“Jane, dear,” Emily said when she was close enough. “The

Marquess of Evanshire.”

Jane looked at the floor, color lighting her pale cheeks. Emily raised an eyebrow at this and sighed. Her poor cousin. The girl couldn't even speak of the opposite sex. She would never make a match at this rate. Poor, poor cousin Jane.

Emily laid her hand on Jane's arm, calling up her cousin's gaze. Emily smiled, revealing only the slightest bits of her teeth so as to calm her nervous cousin.

“Jane, my dear, dear Jane,” she patted Jane's arm. “I just have a simple question, darling.” Emily widened her smile. “Do you happen to know if the Marquess of Evanshire is-“ She paused, never having asked the question before and not entirely certain how the question should be worded. “Well, that is, is the marquess attached in anyway?”

Jane's eyes darted to the left, swimming over the marquess before returning to Emily. “Attached?” Jane said.

Emily sighed again, patted her cousin's arm again. “Yes, attached, Jane,” Emily said encouragingly.

Something strange happened to Jane's face then. It was as if someone had extinguished a candle, and what little light there was to Jane's face simply vanished. Yes, strange, but Emily didn't have time to think on it. She needed to know where she stood when it came to the marquess. Her coming out season was less than a year away. It wasn't much time to prepare.

“I believe he's unattached,” Jane finally said.

Emily smiled truly then, a little squeal slipping through her lips before she could stop it.

“Oh, thank you, Jane,” she said, patting her cousin's arm one more time before letting her go and returning her attention fully to the marquess, completely missing the look of despair on Jane's face.

Yes, Lady Emily Black liked presents. And she had just determined that the perfect present would be the Marquess of Evanshire.

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Cheers,
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About the Author

Jessie decided to be a writer because the job of Indiana Jones was already filled.

Taking her history degree dangerously, Jessie tells the stories of courageous heroines, the men who dared to love them, and the world that tried to defeat them.

Jessie makes her home in the great state of New Hampshire where she lives with her husband and two very opinionated Basset hounds. For more, visit her website at jessieclever.com.